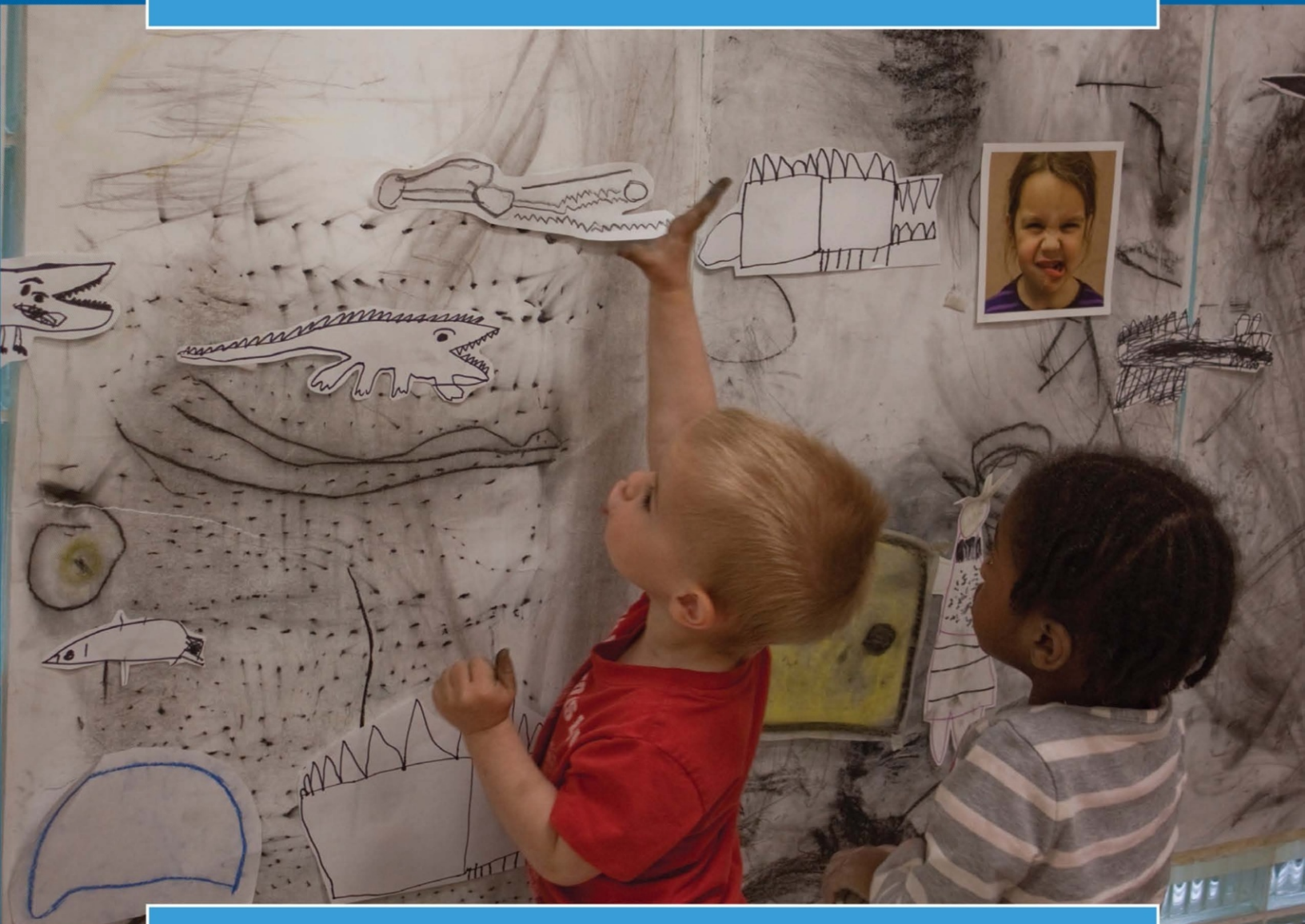


Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele

Marni J. Binder and
Sylvia Kind (Eds.)



**Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work
of Bob Steele**

TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Volume 5

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**Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work
of Bob Steele**

Edited by

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Ryerson University, Canada

and

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SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6300-978-2 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6300-979-9 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6300-980-5 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

Cover photograph: Capilano University Children's Centre studio, by Sylvia Kind

Printed on acid-free paper

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**ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
*DRAWING AS LANGUAGE: CELEBRATING
THE WORK OF BOB STEELE***

Bob Steele's life has been dedicated to the arts in education. In 1998 he published *Draw Me a Story* a book that did not just argue for, but demonstrated the importance of drawing/art in the life of children. It is a book that both confirmed and informed my own understanding and promotion of drawing/art in my early childhood teaching practice. Through that book and the Drawing Network Bob Steele's insights, passion and research around the notion of drawing as language spread. As Michael Emme writes (this volume) 'Bob Steele's mix of romanticism and social responsibility is not so easily dismissed' and this edited collection is evidence of that, filled with writings by teachers, researchers, teacher educators, former students, and artists all influenced and touched by the presence of an artist/educator and his ideas and passion over the past 60 years. Eileen Adams (this volume) provokes the reader with the question 'what is drawing for?' Many of the authors in this collection take up that question and bring forward Bob Steele's understanding of the primacy of drawing in children's authentic engagement with meaning making as they try to navigate the world. In their writing the authors share the multiple ways in which they have been influenced by Bob Steele and his ideas, but more importantly they articulate the ways they have used those ideas alongside children in the journey of becoming. – **Patrick J. Lewis Professor, ECE, University of Regina (Canada)**

As an artist then as an educator and scholar living and working in Canada, Bob Steele held drawing in high regard, as a foundational visual and schematic language that helped young children develop creatively and intellectually. He saw that children used diverse ways and styles for drawing to work out their ideas and beliefs, and he realized that children's drawings held rich clues about a child's thoughts and propositions seen in their reality, and imagined in their fantasies.

Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele offers insightful glimpses into Bob Steele's life-long dedication to promoting daily drawing as a method for honing the ways we can interpret and comment on our experiences and ideas. The text is a rich collection of thoughtful, critical contributions by practitioners and scholars who have experienced, benefitted from, have been influenced by, and continue to endorse Bob Steele's groundbreaking approaches to supporting and nurturing children's drawing as a practice for noticing, analyzing and re-presenting the world and all its possibilities. *Drawing as Language* is filled with the accounts of those who knew Bob: colleagues, family, students and friends. The interviews, family reminiscences, memoirs and contributions collectively present a deeply touching tribute to a visionary artist and educator who continuously advocated for

drawing to sit at the center of a child's education, beyond their formative, early school years and well into their senior schooling.

Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele will add greatly to the libraries of parents, educators, artists and all those who are interested in the communicative power of drawing.

– **Linda Knight, School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

Bob Steele is an extraordinarily energetic, prolific and enduring advocate for Art education more broadly and for children's drawing practices in particular. He has spent his life working with children and their drawings and advocating on their behalf for the crucial place of drawing as a daily personal and educational practice. His reach has been global, yet humble, and he has dedicated his life to this mission. This important book, *Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele*, is far more than homage; it is an expose, a critique and as the editors themselves assert, a significant festschrift.

Significantly, what Binder and Kind have managed to achieve, is to assemble a suite of empathic, accessible, scholarly writings, in keeping with Steele's mission – as Steele himself says, empathy and the empathic nature of drawing along with its important presence as a language form, is the key. Appropriately, the contributions range from colleagues, former students, Art teachers and Art education scholars and explore the work of Steele through varying lenses, in order to create and assemble this valuable festschrift. Through the lens of this edited collection, Binder and Kind have benchmarked the work of a highly significant Art educator as well as created an historical work of Arts (and especially drawing) education – work we can all aspire to in its practicalities, influence over generations of Art educators, compassion and Steele's ever-growing reach. This book makes a highly important contribution to the field of Art education generally, specifically drawing practices and ever more essentially, to children's daily drawing as a fundamental educational and communicative medium.

– **Alexandra Lasczik Cutcher, Senior Lecturer, Education & the Arts, School of Education, Southern Cross University, Australia**

I was first introduced to Bob Steele's work when I was teaching intersession classes at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. In my early days teaching in Hamilton, Ontario, the value and power of children's drawings had been introduced to us by our arts consultant, and throughout my career, Bob Steele's articulation of "drawing as language" was an integral part of my understanding of teaching and learning. Children have always understood the language of drawing, of personal artmaking, and Bob Steele's Drawing Network and his books give us the praxis required for deepening and extending this means of communication with our students.

A classroom needs to be a collective, just as Bob Steele believes, where together we share stories, our own and others, global and personal, and where our responses

take shape in words and images, connecting to and changing our own perceptions, helping to engender authenticity for each of us. I need his wisdom as I work with graduate students, to keep the underpinnings of why we interact with children clear in their research goals.

Somehow the drawings of children open connections to so many processes of meaning making; we begin to relearn the forgotten language of childhood, awakened once more in their drawings, revealed by our personal interpretations of the lines and spaces of syntactic images. Bob Steele knew this all along, and as new theories emerge, we must hearken back to his premise of the value of personal expression, of finding the magic ways of revealing thoughts and feelings that words often cannot translate. I keep his books on my special shelf of ageless writings to act as icons for my teaching life.

– **David Booth, Professor Emeritus, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto**

Drawing as a Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele is an essential and inspiring read, especially for those whose daily routines include the creative presence and endeavoring of young children. In dialogue with Bob Steele, as well as reflective essays of former students, artists and colleagues, this festschrift gives visibility to the extensive composition of personal histories and conceptual sensibilities that shaped Bob's imaginary for authentic aesthetic engagement, and the importance of approaching children's drawing as both a language and site for meaning making. Whether you are already familiar with Bob's work, or only just now making his acquaintance, this edited collection will challenge you to reexamine existing, even emerging orients to drawing, especially in early childhood, and the oft taken-for-granted modes of attunement that comprise our work with young people.

– **Christopher M. Schulte, Assistant Professor of Art Education, Pennsylvania State University, USA**

This collection of anecdotes, interviews and reflections provides a warm introduction to an enthusiastic advocate for children and their drawings. Bob Steele's persuasive ideas and infectious commitment to drawing as a daily practice, as a language uniquely capable of developing empathy and authenticity, are shared, contested, and contextualized by those who gather here to testify to his influence. Understanding drawing primarily as a means of exploring content and telling stories, Bob Steele reminds us that the pathways that each child wanders are far more idiosyncratic, intriguing and important than traditional accounts of children's drawing lead us to believe.

– **Christine Marmé Thompson, Professor, Penn State University**

Inviting the reader to visit with Canadian artist and art educator Bob Steele through interviews, reflective essays, and anecdotes, Marni Binder and Sylvia Kind offer perspectives that solidify the rich affordances of drawing as a means for young

children to connect, communicate, make meaning, and experience language. This wonderful and thoughtful collection brings an important dimension to the discussion of young children's learning and the ways that drawing engages empathy, imagination, ideas, and musings. In reading this book, I was reminded of how the simplicity of children's drawings become complex when we consider the robust processes and reasons for children's drawing activity. While certainly an excellent resource for art educators, the text reaches beyond the field of art to become an important addition to those who work with children and those who are interested in children's early forays into language and literacy.

– **Kristine Sunday, Assistant Professor of Teaching and Learning, Old Dominion University**



*Michael J. Emme, "Bob Steele: Three Stones in Alignment,"
Palladium Printed photo composite, 1986/2007/2015*

“I view the aesthetic experience of nature as a precursor to aesthetic energy in art.”—Bob Steele. *Draw me a story: An illustrated exploration of drawing-as-language*. Winnipeg, MB: Peguis Publishers (1998, p. 74)

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RITA L. IRWIN

BOB STEELE'S DRAWING NETWORK

A Foreword to Looking Forward

It is such a pleasure to write the foreword for this very special edited volume recognizing the tremendous contribution Bob Steele has made to the field of visual arts education. His *Drawing Network* (<http://drawnet.duetsoftware.net>) and books on children and drawing (e.g. Steele, 2011, 2014) have found interest not only among faculty and students at The University of British Columbia but across Canada and indeed internationally. What is so incredible about this edited book is the range of people it represents from Bob Steele's personal network: colleagues, students, artists, and new friends. Indeed, it is a network of individuals coming together to recognize the importance of drawing for everyone, but especially with young children. As I reflect on this coming together of so many people, I cannot help but think about how Bob Steele was ahead of his time: he was and is an individual gifted with forward thinking. Even though he credits others whose scholarship preceded him, his own artistic imagination nurtured insights into how children learn through drawing, through authentic experiences with their sensory world, and through their intense engagement with stories.

In today's art education literature, many are reflecting upon different forms of pedagogy and art. One such discussion is around network theories (see May, 2013). Interpreting art through network theories requires a shift from focusing on the art object to the encounter or the experience. Similarly, interpreting pedagogy through network theories causes us to shift from translating the curriculum text to transforming the curriculum encounter. What is so important about this collection of essays is their thoughtful engagement with Bob Steele's forward-thinking notions of a *Drawing Network* and the philosophy behind his idea. As we learn from Michael Emme's chapter, Bob Steele's socialist leanings created an educationally-oriented cooperative within his classroom: individuals subsequently gained from sharing in the challenges and resources. Indeed, they created a network of artists committed to learning and making art together, building upon the strength of the collective. They learned that their relationships and the processes they were using among them, were contributing to their learning, to their art production, and to their advocacy for the cause of art education.

Recently, one of my doctoral students completed her PhD by studying digital media artist-educators and found that they were engaged with multidisciplinary

R. L. IRWIN

practices of cultural production (May, 2013). In many ways, their networks were based on three forms of connections between their artistic and pedagogical practices: dialogical, collaborative, and performative. Appreciating the relationality necessary for networked practices in contemporary art and pedagogy is essential if we are to rearticulate, perhaps reimagine, pedagogical practices that respond to contemporary ideas, questions, and directions. I think this is where Bob Steele's vision for art education was indeed forward-thinking. He was able to imagine the power of the collective to make significant change, not just through the numbers of people involved, but through the quality of the connections they were making, that is, the philosophical ideas permeating the learning experiences of those he taught and those who became part of the *Drawing Network*.

In these learning communities, Bob Steele holds firm to his belief in individualized authentic learning. Moreover, he believes we need to find ways to help young children learn the language of drawing if we are to encourage a love of drawing. This may be where several authors in this collection deviate from some of Bob Steele's ideas. Whereas his teaching and advocacy practices are steeped in the relational aspects of what is now known as network theory, he also believes in the fundamental nature of individualized authentic learning. Sylvia Kind and Cindy Lee, in this volume, illustrate the social nature of learning among young children and in doing so, provide an example of how Bob Steele's ideas have been adapted and extended. Bob Steele's commitment to networking still resonate on many levels, yet these newly articulated distinctions are important to consider as our society becomes more and more networked on so many levels.

Bob Steele's primary legacy is with his *Drawing Network* and the books he has published on children's drawing (see 2011 and 2014). Yet he also has a legacy with the many people he taught. Some of those individuals are represented in this volume. Each has very fond memories of his significance in their life journey. Many have enacted their own versions of networking in their learning environments. Still others continue to experience the power of the network through his newsletters distributed through various analog and digital forms.

My own experience with Bob Steele is as a dynamic energetic colleague and inspirational advocate for art education. I treasure my many memories of him returning to our home department for years after he retired as he worked on new editions of his *Drawing Network* and related works. I also treasure his artistic contributions to our university community through the numerous prints hanging in our Faculty hallways—prints made by his students. And I will treasure the conversations we have shared when he brought out his recent prints and drawings, and spoke at length in his articulate style about the need to allow children to develop their own language through art. Bob Steele simply has an unstoppable commitment to advocating for drawing and art among young children. His sheer determination is a force to behold. It is on this note that I would like to draw these comments to a close. Bob Steele was, and remains, a remarkable art educator whose work is widely

known and appreciated. His thinking was forward-thinking decades ago and remains so today. May we all look forward to reading more about his work in the future.

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